

Poems of a Period

BY

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Stephen Morrissey

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Note: *Poems of a Period*, by Ron Newton and Stephen Morrissey, was originally published in August 1971 in Montreal. It consisted of 20 pages, five 8 ½ X 11 inch sheets of white paper folded in half and stapled in the middle. Ron Newton was a friend from Monklands High School in Montreal; another friend, also from high school, Stratos Mahmoudides, typeset the book for us. This was my first publication other than poems in "Phase One", our high school literary magazine and *The Banner*, our high school year book. I lost track of Ron Newton soon after we published this chapbook; the last I remember of him is our distributing copies of *Poems of a Period* to bookstores in Montreal. I regret that I don't have Ron's permission to republish his poems; he was a good poet and serious about his work, and the chapbook was his idea. This is a belated "thank you" to Ron, wherever he is, and to Stratos, another old friend with whom I've lost contact.

—Stephen Morrissey
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SEVEN POEMS BY STEPHEN MORRISSEY

A QUEBEC EVENING

My grandmother sits in the evening red
sun setting green & yellow painted
porch; My aunt in her bedroom gets dressed;
I enter the little St. Eustache country cottage—
SLAM the screen door bangs against the latch the wood's
rotten enough, it's been a hot summer day
& my grandmother blows a tired old
breath upwards to blow
away a strand of white hair
fallen over her wrinkled forehead.
She's only got a few teeth left
and she smiles I grin back and
go to the back of the house where my Uncle Alex
in undershirt is shaving,
bald head surrounded by a little white hair
his face is covered with soapy lather
he primes the red pump and
I put the extra shaving lather on
my 9 year old face & pretend to shave with
a blunt old yellow handled knife; We both laugh
as he asks me about my non-existent girlfriends
& he tells me about the French Canadian
girl he used to go out with on St. Antoine Street.

NEAR SAND BAY

We've walked and climbed thru those
silently rolling tree & mossy carpeted
Parry Sounded hills, — here
the earth's no good for growing
crops, only fir trees find
their roots veining downward into
the sandy flowing once molten granite
terrain, — & blueberries
we've spent our days bending
to pluck these blue charms from their
plants & sat on some barren cliff
beneath the mid-day heat the sun
hanging down from the sky pitch blue
reflected in the thousand island waters
the cliff overlooking a meandering brown
dirt road, then further on, past the
marshes, the water, — & clouds off
in the distance rolling in, gently
rolling across the sky
and we've eaten the blueberries
right out of the bowl we dropped their
numbers in, pints and quarts;
There are enough to pick more tomorrow
& bake pies with them back home,
but today, before the rain,
a blueberry festival

1939 CARS

(photograph of a parking lot —
uneven rows of old '30s cars)

All of these cars
 parked here in this
 1939 parking lot
that space now occupied
 by new buildings
that old reality all now
 just a photograph
 saying that it was once
 so — we
 have to take its word
 for it

All of these al capone cars
with their black fenders
driven thru the downtown streets
 by perky pre-war
 optimists
 now they're all history
Did their owners crowd
 out from their 1939
 jobs & roar
 outa there
to get home
 to wife & supper
or to the bar & then
 meet with the boys
 for cards maybe?

All those silver bumpers
dented in by other bumpers
& crushed fenders rusted to brown dust
And my grandfather pouring
a can of oil into the motor
which it promptly crapped out black & gooey
 onto the garage floor

All of those cars
driven from their parking lots
 across America
 at 5 PM
 While Henry Ford counted pennies
All of those cars
 how many descended
 upon the scrap heap

at the same moment?
first making a detour
to spit their owners
into their own 6 foot graves
then proceeding to the
car graveyard death heap
to be piled up 20 stories
of quilted colour
rotting beneath the moon
in an open field
with smooth punctured tires
lying half submerged
in a nearby stream
cars with windows
smashed even bullet-proof
windows smashed
& all that could be rusted
was rusted
brown holes in the body &
muffler dust decay
the silver only a dime thin
layer of tin
which crumpled so easily
All of them
driving to their own dooms
in that 1939 dusk
outside the city
Only to
return today
in a box of musty yellow photos
Did my grandfather's ghost
caress his last motor
caress the steering wheel
the crank case
check the oil
then accept being dead
take his '36 Chevy up with him?

FAT BLACK CROWS

Fat black crows
waddle along the soft shoulder
of the highway
oblivious to the passing cars
& fattened on the
hit dead bodies
of small animals
who attempted
to cross during the
previous nite
or were daring
but still were killed although
the sun was bright
Now a raccoon lies on its belly
its eyes staring blankly & tail
still a fine stripped furry
coon tail
right rear leg
props the bulk of the frame
awkwardly up in some
strained position of death
& now
waits surrendered on the
side of the highway
Occasionally
you see some farmer's dog
which ran across the two lanes
and was hit
lying nobly
on its side
legs outstretched
as tho only asleep
And if the crows don't make a meal
out of the scrapes of flesh,
the road crews shovel
it into their trucks
or carry by two long straight ears
a dead jack rabbit and fling
it into the trash
And I stand beside the highway

thumb out a desperate hour
 while trucks pass
forcing me to lean in to the wind
almost blowing me down off the
side of the road
 where I'll have to sleep tonite
 if my luck doesn't change soon—

FISHERMAN'S DEATH

Like many others
 I have given up
 fishing,
casting out lines
 in sad attempts
 to make a catch,
& ending up
 with a fish hook
 in my arm, with nothing
but scars which refuse to heal.

and where does all of this
try to end?
in what promise to myself
 which I'll never keep;
what solitude
 does tonite hold in store

what silence
what crazy music
 is there in tonite's deep silence;

More snow falling
 I don't hear any
 footsteps outside
 in the snow
because there is
 no one out there

HOLLYWOOD LAMENT: THE MARCH OF TIME

Their celluloid vision
 seen by
myriad passers-thru of
 movie houses
across America — The March of Time

The premier opening nite
Shiny black Cadillacs pull up
 to flashing lite marquees & spotlites
 caressing heaven's belly
the narrow passage up to the theatre
 thru the pushing crowds & autograph hounds
Stars throwing one liners
 to the camera
 These Stars rush across the silver screen
 a collage of minks diamonds teeth
 whole Dachaus of clothes and buffont hair doos
 piled into sprayed formations of
 high society & affluence
 giggled over 40 years later in disbelief—

Forgotten stars long dead and bones,
reappear from the past
strange apparitions who float into the present
presenting only their gayest moments for the
cameras' eye

 disappearing as suddenly as they
 appeared
leaving behind cement impressions in
 Grauman's Chinese
 to vouch for their fleeting reality
Marilyn Monroe disappears
 off the screen to authenticate her
realness and flesh destroyed by age & dust
 the only remains
 of her aloneness finding its grand finale
 in the loneliness of suicide
 and the eternal alone of the grave —

Return to the opening nite, mountains of flowers
 endless cheek kissing, champagne parties &
 caviar breakfast amid the white marble columns
Yet for us they never quite touch the pathos of
 our real human existence
& we never quite touch the reality beneath
 the illusion of their lives,

& Grace Moore's fiery Danish grave
cancelling the promise & vocal cords no more
to produce operatics
blonde haird laurel to rest her head

Into oblivion & George Arliss oblivion and there
will be an Orson Welles' oblivion
and Hollywood's oblivion has already doomed
the acres of empty studios of Paramount
Warner Bros
& the Biograph has long been a dead concern

These untouchable people,
all caught by the camera
find their way into the present
across years of war and depression
to tell us
how it was, now appearing as tho
photographed only yesterday in a distant land,
transmitted from time along altered
until unrecognizable &
unalterable —

These stars
lie beneath the grass, & flowers
are still placed on Valentinos
tearful grave
how they wept in Hollywood
how they wept
in thousands of small town
Middle American girls sweetdreams &
unrequited love
& who weeps for Bella Lagosi
saddened junkie in Dracula
cape & lidded eyes? —

We are all refugees from Movieland
searching for reality
& nostalgic for a Golden Age
desiring a mystical awakening of
Innocence & Joy.

CROSSING THE BROWN SOIL

potato fields
 the French farmer
weeds shrapnel from
 the furrows—
its rusty resistance
to age
 the only evidence of
 death's bumper crop
 years
when Europe used her fairest
 children as fertilizer.
Now the tears have all dried,
their stain of memory
 stored with old photos
 of death & friends;
and as two people calmly
 attend to love
one looking out of the window
asks the other —
 what's the use?
& turns out the lite
desiring only
 tonight's embrace.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Stephen Morrissey's ninth book of poetry is *A Private Mythology* (Victoria, BC, Ekstasis Editions, 2014). Morrissey is also the author of several poetry chapbooks, essays, and numerous book reviews. Stephen Morrissey is the sixth generation of his family in Canada, his ancestors having arrived here from Ireland in the late 1830s. Stephen Morrissey earned his B.A., Honours English with Distinction, at Concordia University. Morrissey studied with poet and scholar Louis Dudek at McGill University earning his M.A. in English Literature. While at McGill Morrissey was awarded the Peterson Memorial Prize in English Literature. Morrissey's extensive literary papers are archived at McGill's Rare Books and Special Collections in the McLennan Library. The Government of Quebec named an island in northern Quebec after a phrase from one of Morrissey's poems, "la vingt-septieme lettre".

Visit the poet at www.stephenmorrissey.ca.

Poetry books by Stephen Morrissey

The Trees of Unknowing, Vehicule Press, Montreal, 1978, 72 pp.

Divisions, Coach House Press, Toronto, 1983, 64 pp.

Family Album, Caitlin Press, Vancouver, 1989, 64 pp.

The Compass, (Book One, The Shadow Trilogy), Empyrean Press, Montreal, 1993, 72 pp.

The Yoni Rocks, (Book Two, The Shadow Trilogy), Empyrean Press, 1995, 64 pp.

The Mystic Beast, (Book Three, The Shadow Trilogy), Empyrean Press, Montreal, 1997, 72 pp.

Mapping the Soul, Selected Poems 1978-1998, The Muses' Company, Winnipeg, 1998, 182 pp.

Girouard Avenue, Coracle Press, Montreal, 2009, 78 pp.

A Private Mythology, Ekstasis Editions, Victoria, 2014, 89 pp.

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Ron Newton and Stephen Morrissey
Montreal, 1971



This photograph, taken by my father of the parking lot behind Montreal's Windsor (train) Station, was the inspiration for the poem "1939 CARS".

—SM